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# *The Nature of God*

## THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

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by

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## THE NATURE OF GOD

### A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

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*Is one religion as good as another?*

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* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

## "The Injustice of God"

● I am a little afraid that my title for this morning is misleading. I think I chose it because it was such a striking title, and then faced the task this week of either preaching to the title or saying what I wanted to say. Of course, I chose the latter. Nevertheless, there is some connection between subject matter and title, and I would like you to see it.

The injustice of God is an interesting field of investigation. But, of course, in this investigation, as in every other, you have to conduct it within certain prescribing limits. Thus, God may be considered unjust only within certain frames of reference, or to put it more badly, within certain theological systems.

Now let us consider one or two illustrations from the Bible. There is the story of the men who were hired to work in the vineyard. Some began to work at six o'clock in the morning, they worked all the way through the day. Others were hired about eleven o'clock in the morning, and still others weren't hired until four o'clock in the afternoon, and yet when it came pay-time, they all received the same amount. Now, there is an injustice there.

It's the old story of the death-bed confession. If you are preparing in this life for another life, then there is an injustice in the fact that the man who has always lived a good life gets no more than the man who is converted at the last minute. Now, mind you, I said if your religion is of the type that considers this life as a build up for another life, then there is a serious injustice there.

Another illustration of apparent injustice is that of the Prodical Son. You realize that here were two brothers, and one of them was a steady, reliable, good fellow. He always did well or did what was right. The other brother was a ne'er-do-well in all popular meaning of that term. He took his share of the money from the farm thereby handicapping in some degree his father and brother in the operation of the farm. And then he went off to spend it in riotous living in the city. When he came back broken and impoverished, his father gave him the best clothes that he had, put a ring on his finger and killed the fatted calf. It is not difficult to imagine that the other son was perhaps just a little resentful. And there would be some reason for it.

The evil was rewarded and the good ignored. We don't glorify the good enough in this world.

● Now, these are just two illustrations, more or less valid, of injustice. But there are more serious charges to be levelled against God and one of them was given expression in our scripture reading this morning from the Book of Habakkuk. The book is entitled "The Burden of Habakkuk". His burden is the problem of the success of the wicked. Here were the enemies of the Jewish people, enemies with no good in them at all, people who made their living by warfare. They had swift horses, and they were strong and fearless. They destroyed as they went. They took what they could conquer and did God do anything about it? No, he let them go on winning, and Habakkuk said in effect: "Now, God, You are a Just Man. Well, why do You permit this sort of thing? How long will you tolerate this kind of thing"? He was evidently the first man of the Bible to be led to wonder about the problem of the existence and triumph of evil in a world ruled by a good God.

Jeremiah was another man concerned with the same problem. Jeremiah didn't want to be a preacher. He didn't even want to be good, but he had to be, and that's what made him a great prophet. The thing within him made him speak up. And Jeremiah looked about him, and he saw the wicked people prospering, and he wanted to know how long God would let that go on. He could see no relationship between the justice of God and the success of the wicked.

The Book of Job is the most famous treatment of this thorny question. You know the story of Job. It is considered to be the highest literary and spiritual treatment of the problem, though it was spoiled in part by people who tried to rewrite it to give it a happy Hollywood ending. Job was a good man. He did all the things that were required of good men. He conformed to the social, moral and spiritual code. And yet, everything happened to him! He was stricken with a dreadful illness. He lost his money. He lost his children. He lost his home. He lost his wife. And Job was a fearless and intelligent man. He looked at the facts and said: "If God be what He is supposed to be, why did this happen to me?" All his friends came along with their pious, foolish answers, saying over again the things that had always been said, "Job, you know that our revered ancestors have said that evil and sickness is God's way of punish- wickedness. Now if our fathers said this, it must be true. Surely you must have sinned. You must be wicked."



Job answered: "I don't care what these people have said in the past. Look at the evidence for yourselves. Are you any better than I am? Why should I suffer and you go free?" And he was ready to curse God, and I wouldn't blame him.

There is an ever growing number of people today receiving telegrams from the Government informing them of the death of their loved one. And they wonder why God does this to them. They rebel against Him, and they are ready to curse Him and die. I don't blame them either. Within their frame of reference, I think they are justified.

Here is a man who comes through battle unscathed. And he gives thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ and God for having saved him. You remember we talked about this sort of thing some months ago. I want to repeat it. And here is another man over here who died in the same battle. Now, if the Lord Jesus Christ saved the one man, He killed the other. I can see no way around this conclusion. If God has the power to save and to destroy, it means that when He lets one man come through, He saved him, and when He lets another be killed, He killed him. Could any other conclusion be logically justified? You can hardly blame people who lose their sons for rebelling against God. If we could only realize the position we put God in when we talk about what He does for us in saving us, and see far enough to realize that such claims carry logical conclusions which, to say the least, are most distasteful and do violence to the goodness of God. As for myself, I must say that, if God be that kind, I will join with Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Job, because I know that the good people don't always prosper; and I know that suffering doesn't always come only to the evil. Some of the very best people I have ever known have been crippled.

● Well, now, what is the problem? It is the problem of pain and suffering. We have always been taught that God sees all; knows all; and does all; that not a hair of your head falls to the ground but that God knows it; not a sparrow is killed, but that God knows it. He knows everything, controls everything, has power to do anything. And along side that, we have been taught by "the people of old" and the people today, that good is always rewarded, and evil always punished. So anyone with a mind puts the two together, and when he suffers, he must figure that God wanted to punish him because God can do what he wants to do. If he gets sick, and is allowed to die in spite of his prayers, God must have wanted him to die. There is the problem, and

there is no way out of it except blind, unreasoning acceptance of what people of old have said, and it's not very good.

● The problem of pain is the problem of evil, and this is the problem in its largest setting. As I said last week, it is perhaps the most persistent problem in religious thought. You have a God Who has created everything. He started it all, and He controls it all. And the claim is made that God is perfection in every aspect. He is perfect wisdom. He is perfect goodness. He is perfect in complete power. He is present everywhere. He knows everything. You have said that God is both the best and the strongest that we know. And then you look over the world, and you see that there is a great deal of evil. There is not just a little bit of evil. There is an awful lot of it! And you say, "Now, how do you reconcile this evil with the Goodness of God? Could God stop it? They why didn't He? And if He didn't stop the evil, can we really say that He is completely good?" Now, if you begin to apologize and say that God doesn't like the evil, in fact, doesn't want it, you are led to ask the question, "Well, then, is God really all-powerful? For if God is all-powerful, He doesn't have to allow anything that He doesn't want." You realize that you can't have your cake and eat it. Under these conditions if God is all-powerful, then He can't be all-good. And there you have the great conflict and problem. But remember that all these things we have been saying are a problem only to those people who want to maintain these two diverse judgments, diverse in view of the evidence, that God is both perfectly good and all-powerful.

Let us now consider some of the ways in which men have sought to explain the presence of evil in a world governed by a God considered all-powerful and all-good.

One of these explanations is that evil is an illusion. You have heard that. It's a popular tenet of the Christian Science Church. Evil is only an illusion. There is no real matter. It is all mental. It sounds rather intriguing at first until you come back to the facts. You see that's why I kept insisting on a factual reference for all religious doctrine. It is the only way to keep you close to earth and reality. If evil is only an illusion there is nevertheless an awful lot of bitter illusion in the world, and whether you call it illusion or reality, it has the same effect. It is a deadly, destroying thing. You don't change the evidence by changing the name. It's still something that hurts, and hurts very deeply in frustrating the developing and the growth of God. Furthermore, to say that evil is an illusion is not to solve



the problem of conflict between God's goodness and His strength and the evil in the world.

The second explanation is that evil is necessary for free men. We would rather have a man who was free and a sinner, but striving for good, than one who had no possibility of choice and was therefore to be considered perfectly good. We honor the moral effort. That's why we say it is so difficult to judge people. Someone on a lower scale of life may be making a far greater moral effort, and making a far greater spiritual achievement than those who live on a higher level without effort. And so it is claimed that evil is necessary to develop this freedom of man and to make him the kind of being that he ought to be. In response to this assertion one is led first of all to ask whether God himself is free in this sense? One would hardly believe that God, in the traditional sense, could be tempted.* Proponents of this viewpoint do not consider God ever being in doubt about what to do. At least one certainly does not believe that He "achieved" His moral stature because of His freedom of choice. Secondly, if God is all-powerful surely he could have found a way to ensure the nobility of men without subjecting them to the ravages of evil. Why could not man's perfection be like unto that of God and this from the beginning. Thirdly, and this is most important, most of the real serious evil in the world is not of such nature as to develop virtue through freedom of choice, but is rather that which hinders, impedes, and destroys moral and spiritual freedom. Evil in its most grievous form is that which makes a choice impossible or forces us into one avenue without possibility of avoiding it. These evils lay themselves on growing lives or descend upon men in some such form as this present awful war. Do you think this war is developing the freedom of Man? Do you think that the evil of this war is something that glorifies Man? We didn't have much choice about it. And these fellows who are bleeding in it, is it helping their freedom. Would you choose it, would you choose it as something to glorify Man? Ask them. Ask them about it.

● And children who grow up in homes where they don't ever have a chance. Where they are given a miserable heritage to begin with, ignorant parents who restrict and frustrate them even more, and they grow up liking only one thing because they never knew anything else. Now that's the kind of evil that is most destructive, and it doesn't give any freedom, it restricts freedom of choice. So when you talk about the glory of evil and what it does to develop Man, you should investigate some

of these awful conditions that are a little beyond the temptations that you are thinking of.

● Evil is necessary for moral character is the third idea. And this really follows from what we have been saying, or is a part of it. It is certainly good to have a certain amount of temptation because if you have anything within yourself and a freedom of choice, it strengthens you. It is good, I think, to have some sicknesses because it makes you appreciate good health. It's good to have to work for your education, for the things in life that are good, but when you have to work so hard that you don't get a chance to enjoy them, it is no longer a value. It is awfully good to have some of these evils in life, but when these very evils destroy your moral character before you get a chance to begin to develop one, you can hardly say it was a wise set-up, or that the Good God that created those conditions was really working for the greatest good for all men.

War is the greatest of modern evils, perhaps, I don't know. And all these things, war, like everything else, if it hits you mildly enough, and you have had enough training and background beforehand, you can handle. But it is like a sudden crisis for a person who isn't prepared for it. If the crisis is too intense, then before you have got time to learn how to meet it, it has broken you. Some evils will be helpful to your moral character only if you have been given a chance beforehand to prepare yourself for them. But the worst evils are those, just as in freedom, that destroy your spirit before you even begin.

Fourthly, we have dwelt on this already, evil is a punishment for sin. This is the most common explanation. It is the one that people have given from away back in the beginning, and it's still given. It's still there in the minds of people, that if they suffer, they must be sinners. But, as we have already said, look around you at the evidence. Will you trust the things that you can see and prove for yourselves, or will you trust something that somebody said a thousand years ago. . Now, I am not saying because it is a thousand years old it isn't right, but I am saying if it was right a thousand years back, the evidence of our life today should confirm its rightness, not deny it. And Job some hundred years, perhaps, before the time of Jesus, didn't think it was right, and I am sure that no sane thinking person today can agree to the rightness of the claim that evil is punishment for sin.

Fifthly, you can say that God's way is not our way. After all, you are just one person, and I am just one person, and who



are we to be weighing the rightness or the wrongness of things when, after all, there is a great God above. How do we know that God's ways are not different from our ways; and who are we to sit in judgment on Him? And here again there is a ring of truth in such a statement, and an appeal, until you begin to inquire about the results of such an idea, and you realize that, first of all, it's just a good way of getting rid of the obligation of rational thought and adjustment. Whenever anything troubles you, and you can't explain it, you say it is a miracle, or you put it in the lap of God, and then you excuse yourself from ever exploring anything which at any one time you don't understand. Then again we should ask ourselves this question: If our ways do not fit in with God's way, how do we know that what we think is good is really good? May not the thing that we think evil in the sight of God be good? How can we tell how to proceed if our most practical judgment, based upon the evidence that we meet in our life, doesn't give us any substantial basis upon which to work? All rational living is gone, and there is no standard but caprice.

Another explanation, very much the same as the foregoing, is to say that evil here is not evil for God. This is really argument. It is one of my most earnest hopes that we shall develop a more pronounced aversion to any kind of intellectual or spiritual evasion of problems as being unworthy evasion. There is neither evidence nor value in the assumption that God's ways are different from ours. Surely the evidence and our reason would suggest that good is treasured in the nature of things and belongs somehow or other to God Who must be discovered through the best that we know. Otherwise, all justification for good living is cut off. Surely there is no better or more sound basis for life than the idea that whatever else there may be afterward that which is genuinely good here and now for Man will be good anywhere, any time. When a man has that faith and builds his life on it, there is nothing that can bother him, and no idea that can throw him off his course.

● Now there are several ways in which the problem has tried to be answered from the standpoint of God. We have been dealing so far with the efforts to explain it from the standpoint of evil. Now let us look at it from the standpoint of God, if such be possible. Men have said that God created the world and then left it and let it run on its way, without further interference. This is what is known as the Deistic point of view, for you who are interested in such terminology. It seems to me that one

must conclude that this is no explanation for the evil in the world, because if God were all-powerful and knew everything, then He could have created a world which would have run on without evil. He doesn't have to intere in it. He should have known beforehand what would happen, and if He were all-powerful and all-knowing, He could have created a different world. Thus even by this explanation, God is still responsible for the evil.

● The second way of approaching it, and this is good Christian tradition, is to say that God is opposed by a being called Satan. And I can remember, in my childhood, the terror that Satan carried, through the pictures of him and his hell, distributed by good-meaning, religious people. The idea is that God is in a combat with Satan, and this has been extolled by the poets and novelists. God doesn't have it all His own way because He has got to beat Satan, and He will not destroy Satan until some day when Jesus comes back to earth and leads that great fight which will finally eliminate this being opposed to God. Now I am not going to quarrel with the idea at the moment except to point out that if Satan has the power to frustrate God's purposes here and now, you must come to the conclusion that God is not all-powerful. On the other hand, if the victory is ultimately sure for God, then you must also decide that God is not all-good because if He can destroy Satan at a later date, He could have destroyed him at the beginning, or not have allowed him to arise in the first place.

Evil in the world means that God is either not all-good, or not all-powerful.

A third idea is that evil is what one modern American philosopher has termed, "the given part of God." He means that evil resides within the Nature of God. It is an actual part of His being. This is one of the mere sophisticated modern attempts to combine these two irreconcilables. And yet, it must be said that if evil belongs in God, then God, as such, cannot be entirely good because evil is a part of Him. Or, if you accept it as a part of God, then God is not all-powerful.

You should remember that I have said this whole problem is such, only within a particular frame of reference. And you must realize that that frame of reference is the notion we have been refuting here in this series, that God is some supernatural, transcendental being who created everything and resides outside the world, or makes inroads here, or resides here at times in a transcendental manner, interfering with the process of



things when, as an if He wishes. This God has been described as perfect with all the attributes we have listed. But when you list all these attributes and begin to examine them, you ask, first of all, Well, how do you know these things about a God Whom you can't know, and if you do know these things, then how do you put them together? And you find that, logically, they don't go together.

Now, if God be considered as we have suggested, the best of this world, if He be that in the universe which is most worthful to human existence, then you see we are under no obligation whatsoever to say that God is also all-powerful.

There are two ways of proceeding in any investigation, and I want to be sure that you understand this. You may proceed by building up a notion of what you want God to be: All perfection, for instance, and list all the things that God must be and then assert and impose your idea upon reality, regardless of evidence. The second way, the scientific way, proceeds by refining the term "God" as we have done in saying that it will apply to the most worthful thing. Now, here in this world of reality, let's go out and *find* what the most worthful thing is. Or you may say, God must be the maximum of good and strength combined, and you would go out and look for the reality, if any, that would meet such a requirement. Given such a basic definition, existence would determine its content. You would not, previously, in your own mind say what God had to be, and then make God that, regardless of any evidence or any consideration.

● I have given the suggestion that God is the most worthful thing, the most worthful thing for human existence. He is that upon which men must build their lives if they will build good lives. He is that upon which men, in all times, have been dependent for all the really enduring pleasures and goods of life. That thing, whatever it is, wherever it is, is God. And we have decided that God is Love, because Love is the most important thing in the world. It's that without which men cannot live. It's that without which this animal is not man. It's the creator of men. It is the creator of personality. It is the creator and sustainer of all that we treasure. Now we say, "Well, what good is this?" And I ask you, if this is the most important thing for human life, why should we ask also that it be the strongest? Why should we even ask that it be the strongest? If you had a choice between the strongest and the best over a long term, which would you take?

God suffers many frustrations and many things which militate against Him, and we are not sure now whether those frustrations will be too much for God on this level of life, or whether God will be too strong for them. But we shouldn't really care, because if this is the best, that's what we will serve, whether it wins or whether it loses! You wouldn't take the strongest because it would be temporarily victorious if it were not ultimately the best. A really good man never sacrifices principle to expediency. So with God, we can see that the victory not altogether sure as far as we are concerned, but we dedicate ourselves to the proposition that it is the most worthful for human life and therefore that which we shall worship and serve to the end, be what it may.

● Of course, one may with good purpose, ask just how much power such a God has. We have said He is the most worthful. All right then, actually how strong is He in the sense of strength and power? I am going to suggest three or four considerations in very brief form.

The strength or the power of God is the power of goodness. How strong is that? The evidence isn't all in yet. I like to think of Jesus as the great experiment. One day He stood opposite that City of Caesarea Philippi, and looked at the might of the Roman Empire. He knew what he could or must do to win their support and to be strong like that, but Jesus, from that moment set His face like a flint to go to Jerusalem. He had made up His mind. He, for Himself, would bet on goodness.

Now the citadels of empire are still here, and they are growing in strength and in apparent importance and popularity. Where do you, nineteen hundred forty-five years after His birth, cast your vote, and on which side do you stand?

The power of God is the power of goodness, and the power of goodness is the power of practicality and principle. It means that you know that the good is right and basic. You see it is a principle that is good and sound and regardless of the fact that the barbarians can be successful, you know the principle is not vitiated. It is a matter of expediency versus principle, and as for you, you will bet on principle, because you know that the wisdom and experience of the race indicates that sooner or later principle will win out, and even now pays those who use it. How strong is that? We must all decide for ourselves.

The power of God is the power of goodness and the power of goodness is the power of principle. The power of God, in the third place, is the power of persistence. He comes back, and



He comes back, and He comes back! Men catch visions of Him, and they glorify Him and they build up temples to Him, and they worship Him in their lives, and then they destroy their temples, and they turn against Him. They become weary of their devotion and their service and they turn away. Men build cities with their hands and their skill. Men invent things that will contribute to the good living of their fellow-men and to efficiency and effectiveness and to beauty and to goodness, and then they turn around and tear them down with the same skill and weapons that built them. Men trample under-foot all the good that has taken centuries to build up. They turn their backs on it. They lose interest in it. They become crude and cross and rough and ugly, and they fail to hold the vision of the thing which they once had seen. Yes, they trample it under-foot and destroy it from above and walk away from it in their spirits, but God comes back, and back and back! Even in the midst of the greatest destruction of God, Men are finding Him, and if we are reduced to two people huddled around a fire in the midst of a great blackness, God will be there. He is persistent.

● And finally, God's power is the power of goodness, and that's the power of endurance; and the power of endurance, you see, is the power of rightness because only that which is really and eternally right, which is rooted too deep in life and in human nature for any person to destroy will ultimately endure. No matter how your wickedness may seem to triumph, we should remember that a thousand years in the sight of God is but as a day. For He is down there in the nature of things, working up through. He springs like a fountain of living waters that stems from the very inmost nature of things, springing up as a fountain of goodness to persuade us and convince us that well-being, truth, beauty, and goodness are rooted in the nature of things; that God can't ever be defeated but Man can be! But "the only defeat for Man, as for any other grades of the universe, would be to ease the pain by a cessation of effort."